

Correspondence

Late HIV Diagnosis

TO THE EDITOR: The early diagnosis of infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) provides the potential for several benefits. Persons diagnosed at an early stage of HIV infection can receive more timely medical care, along with psychosocial support services and preventive interventions.^{1,2} In addition, knowledge of one's infection can be an incentive to take precautions to prevent transmitting HIV to others and to notify those who may have already been exposed.³

As part of an ongoing interview project sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,⁴ we obtained information on the date of a first-positive HIV antibody test and the reasons for seeking testing among a sample of 678 (89%) men and 82 (11%) women who were reported to the Los Angeles County acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) surveillance registry between January 1990 and July 1994. The median time interval from a first-positive HIV test to a diagnosis of AIDS was 14 months. This interval did not vary by sex (14 months for both men and women) but did vary by race or ethnicity (8 months for both blacks and Latinos compared with 32 months for whites), education level (8 months for those who had not completed high school, 13 months for high school graduates, 15 months for those with some college, and 29 months for college graduates), and risk group (6 months for persons reporting heterosexual risk, 13 months for men reporting sex with men, 19 months for persons reporting injection-drug use, and 23 months for men reporting sex with men and injection-drug use). The racial or ethnic variation found in the total group was evident in each education stratum.

Almost half (46%) of those interviewed reported that the main reason they sought HIV testing was because they were ill (Figure 1). Only 26% of men and 24% of women reported that their primary reason for seeking testing was that they believed they were at risk of infection.

Given an estimated median incubation period for AIDS of about ten years,⁵ these data suggest that many persons reported with AIDS in Los Angeles County during 1990 to 1994 were unaware of their infection until relatively late in their disease course. A late diagnosis was especially common among blacks, Latinos, persons with less education, and persons reporting sexual activity as their only HIV risk. Of particular concern is that many respondents reported not seeking testing until they were ill.

Although these data were collected from persons reported with AIDS and, thus, may not be representative of all those infected with HIV, the findings highlight the need for increased efforts to ensure early diagnosis and

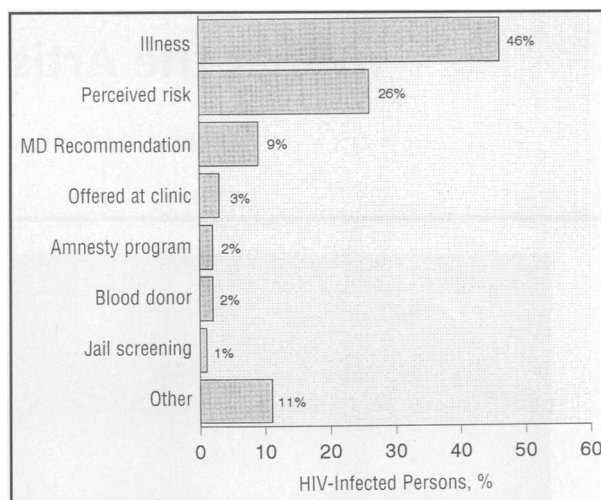


Figure 1.—The graph illustrates the primary reason given for seeking human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) testing among persons reported with the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in Los Angeles County, January 1990 to July 1994 (n = 760).

referral for services among those who are infected. Individual and institutional barriers to HIV antibody testing must be identified and efforts made to reduce or eliminate them. Essential to this process is a commitment to ensuring that all persons who are HIV infected have access to needed services and that adequate legal safeguards are in place to protect against discrimination.

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